

ABORTION

Rongy, A. J., M.D., F.C.A.S. *Abortion: Legal or Illegal.* New York, 1933. The Vanguard Press. Pp. 212. Price \$2.

DR. RONGY'S book is likely to have a large circulation in America, for it deals with a controversial subject and is written in a clear easy style, unimpeded by references or footnotes. For the same reason it is a little tantalizing to the student, especially in its historical treatment of its subject: one would like for example to know what evidence there is that the early Christians were sufficiently eugenically-minded to oppose abortion in order to increase their own numbers, and Dr. Rongy does not sufficiently substantiate his statement that the ancient world saw nothing wrong in the practice. He is in fact far too prone to dismiss all opposition as due to a "moral cloud" resulting from Catholic doctrine as to purity, and thus fail to distinguish contraception and sterilization, which can only injure society or religion, from abortion the serious ethical objection to which is based on the rights of the unborn child. The confusion of thought is equally conspicuous on both sides. If the Pope really condemns contraceptive devices on the ground that they destroy life, he should logically accept the implications of Hinduism, encourage the fullest use of the reproductive faculty and rigorously suppress virginity; if Dr. Rongy sees nothing wrong in abortion, he should tell us his views on infanticide, for it is ridiculous to treat the newly born baby as a complete human being and yet say that a day previously it was a non-existent creature incapable of rights. Strangely enough the Anglican Church at the Lambeth Conference of 1930 adopted the only logical attitude, that expressed tersely in the words of the Universalist General Convention of 1929, "birth control is the prevention of conception only, and is not the destruction of embryonic life, which is abortion"—logical, since the only clearly defined line in a gradual process is that to be drawn between the gamete, which might in certain circumstances

go to make a new human being and the embryo which will eventually become one unless something occurs to prevent its growth.

But such logical divisions do not coincide with human feelings and few persons would in practice be willing to sacrifice a woman's health, reputation and position to the interests of a formless and apparently lifeless piece of matter; hence arose the mediæval supposition of a time when the child becomes "viable," a doctrine encouraged by, but not logically dependent on, the hypothesis of an immortal soul entering the body; and hence also comes about the prevalence of abortion in all ages since numerous people, especially other women, will suppose they have a right if not a duty to help a woman out of trouble. As a result all laws against abortion must necessarily prove ineffective. When it is remembered that it is an offence by English law to give a woman medicine to bring on menstruation, delay in which may be due to pregnancy, it will seem scarcely an exaggeration to say that this offence must have been committed at some time upon every woman who is not a virgin, although in practice prosecutions always relate to the termination of pregnancies which are far advanced; and the strongest argument for the legalization of abortion is derived from its evils when practised as a crime. These are in the main similar in America and in England. The practice corrupts such medical men as adopt it just as fraudulent finance destroys business habits: it tends to be taken up by the least desirable practitioners, and an immense amount of pain, disease and death is caused to the women whose pregnancies are terminated by charlatans, rogues and drunkards or by their own unskilful hands.

The word "racket," which is one of Dr. Rongy's chapter titles, is American and we may smugly congratulate ourselves that the system it denotes is unknown here. Nevertheless, abortion does give rise to an immense amount of blackmail—blackmail of the most horrible type, women having to submit to sexual intercourse with the man who is to perform the operation; blackmail of the ordinary sort, abortionists paying large sums

to avoid prosecution and blackmail of the semi-legal variety as an incident in divorce suits or breach of promise actions. In civil litigation the fashion in the Law Courts is to show incredulity as though it were not notorious that hospitals never report cases in which abortion has been practised and as if the only abortionists were those who find themselves involved in a prosecution very often as the result of the woman's death. These defendants who range from well-meaning but unskilful philanthropists to real villains are very often women, with the result that, most sexual crimes being legally impossible and high finance not open to women, a large proportion of the women in penal servitude have been sent there for abortion. Obviously since abortion is totally forbidden its intelligent regulation is impossible, but in practice the richest and most competent abortionists are seldom prosecuted.

All this would be remedied by the legalization of abortion. But there are arguments on the other side with which the present book does not fairly deal. If, as it leads one to suppose, abortion is in America most practised by married women who do not want more children, the same is not the case in England, where most of the women concerned are unmarried, and though fear of pregnancy may not deter many women, yet it is clear that the legalizing of abortion would be a further blow to the cause of morality. A more serious argument against it is based on the fact that contrary to Dr. Rongy's view, an abortion does often have a most deleterious effect if not on the health yet on the feelings and nerves of the woman. The willingness of the victims to give evidence against the abortionists cannot be solely due to intimidation by the police and often no doubt represents a genuine semi-physical reaction against the termination of a natural process.

CECIL BINNEY.

BIRTH CONTROL

Cox, Gladys M., M.B., B.S. *Clinical Contraception*. London, 1933. William Heinemann (Medical Books) Ltd. Pp. vi+173. Price 7s. 6d.

THIS book is at its best when it most exactly lives up to its title. In the chapters—fortunately, the majority—that set out to instruct practitioners in birth-control technique, describing established contraceptive procedures, their application, relative merits and special indications, the level reached is higher than in any other work on birth control addressed to medical readers. Not only is the matter itself admirably selected and presented, but the writing has a hard exact quality that is as attractive as it is rare in works on this subject. It is evident that in these sections of her book, Dr. Cox speaks straight from the consulting-room and the clinic, and not from the library. Probably no English writer on contraception can claim a greater or more varied experience in giving birth-control instruction.

The rest of the book, in particular where it deals with the chemistry of contraception and the appraisal of such methods as the use of vagino-uterine pessaries, is not quite up to the same very high standard. Here Dr. Cox has perforce drawn more on the work of others than on her own experience, and it is no reflection on her to say that her own experience is worth all the scissors and paste in the world. Giving, however, the fullest weight to this criticism—which, in fact, concerns only a relatively small part of the work—it must in fairness be said that even among those who are held (rightly) to be authorities on contraception there can be but few who would not learn something of practical value from reading this book. It is the most complete work by an English writer on the clinical aspects of the subject.

E. M. HOLMES.

